

FRIENDSHIP AS MORAL EXPERIENCE

ETHNOGRAPHIC DIMENSIONS AND

ETHICAL REFLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Building upon some early observations regarding the place of friendship in fieldwork in the writings of George Devereux and Clifford Geertz, the limits and possibilities of a friendship-based approach to ethnography are critically investigated by means of a phenomenology of moral experience. Such an effort brings to light the various ways that friendship may potentiate an ethical orientation to the concrete complex existence of others that resists reductive forms of closure and typification.

Keywords: friendship, morality, experience, phenomenology

Introduction

I had woken up that Thursday morning in late June of 2011 ready to begin working on an article that was very close to finished. After being awake for an hour drinking coffee and organizing my thoughts, I decided to check my email. At the top of the list of correspondences, mostly work-related, was a notification from my Facebook account concerning a message recently posted to a group that had been set up by a few of the younger children in my adopted Yapese family. The message had no title. While I only check up on the site occasionally, for some reason on this particular morning I felt compelled to look. The message had been posted by one of the eldest girls. It began, 'My best memories of Tutuw is when he used to work at the power plant.' I stopped reading immediately. There was no need to continue. It was clear what had happened. My adopted Yapese father Maffel had passed away. This was not an unexpected event. Maffel had been fighting cancer for over six years. We all knew that it was only a matter of time before we lost him. We just had no idea how much or how little time we had.

No matter how much we might anticipate such a loss, prepare for it, dread or fear it, its impact in the moment of its occurrence can still break upon us with a lacerating suddenness. Expected or not, the sheer actuality and irreversibility of the death of a loved one disrupts, unsettles and devastates. Sitting and staring at my computer screen I was stunned, emotionless at first. Any thoughts that may have been lingering in my mind about the article I was about to finish vanished. My body went numb. Quickly piercing through the embodied emptiness that had momentarily engulfed me was a sharp and singular thought: 'I will have to tell "Big Z".' 'Big Z', as my Canadian father affectionately nicknamed her, is my Yapese niece (the middle daughter of my second eldest Yapese

brother). At the time she had been living with me in Los Angeles for a little over a year while attending a local college. At that moment, she was still asleep in her room. Staring at her bedroom door from the dining room table where my computer was set up, I knew that I was going to be the one who would have to tell her of her grandfather's passing. That is, unless she too thought to check her Facebook account that morning before getting ready for school. As it turns out, she had not.

When a half hour later 'Big Z' emerged from her bedroom smiling, with her schoolbooks in hand, I found myself unable to speak. I felt paralyzed by the weight of bringing Maffel's death into her world. Despite wanting to say much more, and wishing more than anything that there was nothing to say to her at all that morning, the only thing I could muster was a weak voicing of Maffel's name. Where words failed me, the quality of my voice and the expression on my face apparently did not. She knew in that moment that her grandfather was gone. Before the smile could fully disappear from her face, 'Big Z' turned and punched the wall. She then collapsed into my arms and cried. I tried my best to comfort her.

A friend and a father

Maffel was a quiet, generous, and earnest man, who first took me into his home in the summer of 2001. Initially this was as a paying visitor, a student who was there for a summer to begin learning Yapese, as well as getting to know something of what it was like to live life in a Yapese village. It was clear to me soon after first meeting him, however, that we had a bond. To call that initial inkling of affinity 'friendship' seems a stretch.¹ And yet, somehow I sensed a strong and almost immediate connection with him.

As the months and years passed Maffel and I grew closer. Over time our bond strengthened and I increasingly felt a part of the family. One day, a few years and a few visits after our first meeting, Maffel asked me to stop paying the monthly rent that we had initially agreed upon as compensation for the burden of having me stay in the house. He requested instead that I simply contribute like everyone else did to the family's needs whenever and however I could. I agreed. But I also always found ways to get Maffel the money that was formerly deemed 'rent', which I knew he still needed.

While I could say more about the details of our time together, the things that happened, how they transpired, and who was involved, it is, in the end, impossible to tell the story of how our relationship grew over the years, nor can I account for the subtleties of sentiment that were sedimented in what Alfred Schutz would call the time of our 'growing-old together'. What I can say is that during that time, we spent countless hours sitting with one another on the veranda of his house. Often we would sit in silence, chewing betel nut, drinking a coffee or a beer, enjoying our simple co-presence. When words were exchanged we often talked of our plans for the day, little things like going into town, feeding the family pig or our participation in village work. Whenever there was a funeral, and there were far too many of those, Maffel would ask me to contribute along with others in the family to the donations that were expected from our household and clan. Maffel had an extremely strong sense of fairness. Never once did he ask for a penny more than he himself could contribute. Whenever I did try to offer more, he refused it, stating

simply, *'kayog'* (enough). Contributions, like 'rent', it seems, at times both threatened and redefined the fragile trajectory of our growing amity.

From my perspective, Maffel helped me much more than I could ever hope to help him. He took me into his house, treated me like one of his sons, and looked out for my best interest in ways that I am sure I will never know. In the end, it was Maffel who taught me how to embody the virtues inherent in ideal Yapese notions of masculinity. Through his example I learnt how to demonstrate respect to others, how to comport myself in a humble and yet confident way, how to properly express and control my emotions, and how to quietly fulfill my duties as a participating member of a Yapese household and village.

This is not to say that Maffel did not have his faults. He did, as we all do. But he was always, despite those faults, a caring, quiet, and good man who did what he could, with the limited means he had available, to take care of his family and friends and to contribute to the community. He was, as much as anyone has been in my life, a close friend to me. And yet, he cared for me in ways that were far more fatherly than friendly. When Maffel eventually decided to officially adopt me into his family by giving me a Yapese name, almost eight years after my first stay with him, I was powerfully affected by both the intimacy of the gesture and the responsibilities that came along with it. For quite some time before that moment, however, I had felt that Maffel was not only one of my closest friends, but another father to me.

As a friend and a father, it is probably of little surprise to anyone that I feel especially protective of Maffel's memory. Part of my efforts to 'protect' his memory includes my decision to use Maffel's actual name, and not a pseudonym, in the context of this essay. One could indeed argue that the extent to which the traces of his presence in this world are being preserved through my writing, Maffel's memory is being 'protected'. It has yet to vanish from this world. 'For to love friendship', Derrida reminds us, 'it is not enough to know how to bear the other in mourning; one must love the future' (2005: 29). Using Maffel's name is also protective of his memory in a second sense, however. In refusing to obscure the identity of the actual, singular, and irreplaceable man who was my friend in the context of this article, I am forced to keep the ethical bond of our friendship in the foreground of my awareness throughout it. Accordingly, and this is significant for what I will further say about friendship in this article, I will not be able to share here or elsewhere many aspects of what made Maffel the man he was. Maffel's faults, as well as many of his acts of kindness, care, and support, will remain in the protective bonds of secrecy and intimacy that are secured by our friendship. This is a friendship that endures, even now that he is gone.

I say all of this not only to eulogize a man for whom I care for and miss deeply. I also say it as a means to concretely frame a question I want to explore here more closely. The question being: Can we ever truly write ethnographically about our friends?

On 'partial-fictions half-seen through'

In a much overlooked article, first published in 1968 in the pages of the *Antioch Review*, entitled 'Thinking as a Moral Act: Ethical Dimensions of Anthropological Fieldwork

in the New States', Clifford Geertz sets out to examine two key moral problems facing ethnographers working in postcolonial settings. The first ethical dilemma concerns what he terms a diagnostic as opposed to a curative bias of ethnographic engagement. As Geertz succinctly phrases it, ethnographers are situated in the midst of an 'imbalance between the ability to uncover problems and the power to solve them' (1968: 157). While ethnographers are aptly equipped to diagnose social ills, they are poorly positioned to provide much, if any, cure.

According to Geertz, this first dilemma is closely linked to a second ethical dimension of anthropological fieldwork that resides in the 'inherent moral tension between the investigator and his subject' (*ibid.*). This 'inherent moral tension', as Geertz phrases it, arises from an inescapable and paradoxical pair of asymmetrical relations in the 'fieldwork situation' (1968: 151). On one hand, Geertz observes, the people who anthropologists tend to work with are often themselves seeking remedy for forms of social suffering, marginality, poverty, and inequity that the anthropologist has no power or means to supply. On the other hand, the anthropologist who has herself been 'a benefactor of just the sort of improvements (...) [her informants] are looking for, is also obliged to ask them for charity—and what is almost worse, having them give it' (1968: 150). Despite these paired asymmetries, or as Geertz implies, perhaps because of them, ethnographers have little other to offer the people who are charged with helping them, than their sincere interest in their wellbeing, and perhaps if things go well enough, their friendship.

Friendship, while possible, is in Geertz' estimation then all too often a 'set of partial fictions half seen-through' (and accordingly, I would add, a set of partial-truths half-obscured) that arises in response to the disquieting recognition, even if only partially conscious, of the asymmetries inherent in ethnographic practice in postcolonial contexts. As he explains,

The only thing one really has to give in order to avoid mendicancy (or—not to neglect the trinkets-and-beads approach—bribery) is oneself. This is an alarming thought; and the initial response to it is the appearance of a passionate wish to become personally valuable to one's informants—ie., a friend—in order to maintain self-respect. The notion that one has been marvelously successful in doing this is the investigator's side of the touching faith coin: he believes in cross-cultural communion (he calls it 'rapport') as his subjects believe in tomorrow. It is no wonder that so many anthropologists leave the field seeing tears in the eyes of their informants that, I feel quite sure, are not really there. (Geertz 1968: 151)

In raising these issues, Geertz does not wish to argue against the possibility of 'genuine human contact across cultural barriers', however. He wants instead to highlight the very real ethical ambivalences that arise from the 'vocational ethic' to which anthropologists must subject themselves. This ethic is based on the cultivation of an attitude in which engagement and detachment are, if never fused, brought into close contact. Accordingly, as Geertz concludes, anthropology demands its practitioners to

combine two fundamental orientations toward reality—the engaged and the analytic—into a single attitude. It is this attitude, not moral blankness, which we call detachment or disinterestedness. And whatever small degree of it one manages to attain comes not by adopting an I-am-a-camera ideology or by enfolding oneself in layers of methodological armor, but simply by trying to do, in such an equivocal situation, the scientific work one has come to do. (1968: 157)

Professional stances, segmental theories, and the 'negation of existence'

Published a year prior to Geertz' article, George Devereux' classic book *From Anxiety to Method* also critically examines the social scientific attitude and vocational ethic that Geertz finds inescapably tied to ethnographic encounters. Grounding his analysis in psychodynamic insights into the interplay of processes of transference and countertransference, Devereux takes issue with social scientific attempts to translate concrete individual action into analyzable and typified indications of a cultural heritage (see Jackson 2010). Such a 'professional stance' promotes, Devereux argues, a 'segmental theory' of human existence that focuses primarily upon those aspects of the human condition that are the least morally problematic and anxiety provoking for the ethnographer. In such cases, the ethnographer's interlocutors are reduced by mean of such methodological and theoretical choices to partial representations of their full humanity. This, in short, results in a countertransferentially motivated, and unrecognized, 'negation of (...) existence' (1967: 98).

The situation is made more complicated, however, given the fact that the anthropologist is not alone in creating the intersubjective milieu within which such countertransferentially motivated 'negations of existence' occur. In fact, as Devereux makes clear, in many situations the ethnographer's interlocutors are also complicit in this process through their taking up of 'complementary roles' that are defined, at least partially, in relationship to the perceived desires, wishes, and interests of the ethnographer. In such cases, the correspondence between the ethnographer's anxiety-driven moral blind-spots and the reactions of those with whom he or she engages while in the field, result in a largely unrecognized intersubjectively distributed amplification of defensive distortion and the resulting reduction of the complexity of both the ethnographer's and his or her interlocutors' subjectivities.

If taking up a 'professional stance', orienting to 'segmental aspects' of another's existence, and confronting the 'complementary roles' of those with whom we work, are, as Devereux argues, defensive reactions motivated by deeply sedimented ambivalences and anxieties on the part of both parties, ones that are also significantly personally and culturally patterned, how is it then possible to attenuate the necessary epistemological distortions and ethical failings Devereux diagnoses at the heart of such interactions? Devereux provides one answer in his call for anthropologists to examine more carefully processes of transference and countertransference in the field. He provides another possible, and perhaps complementary answer, however, in his rather brief discussion of ethics and friendship in the ethnographic encounter.

In framing his discussion of friendship Devereux begins with the suggestion that sexual experience and love give rise to forms of 'empathy' and 'shared experience'² that significantly bypass the distortions of 'an obsessive pursuit of "pseudo-objectivity"' (1967: 118). In Devereux's estimation, sexual intimacy and love are basic human experiences that lead to the development of forms of understanding that are fundamentally existentially grounded and human-centered. As such, while certainly no less charged with ambivalence and conflict than scientific orientations, Devereux argues that it is existence as such, and not desire for categorical typification and analysis, that is primarily at stake in such interactions.

Certainly not naïve enough to believe that ethnographers, as transient visitors to other ways of being, are unproblematically able to achieve what he terms an ‘authentic-love relationship’ (1967: 119), Devereux believes, however, that ethnographers can, hopefully, if they are genuine enough, still make friends. According to Devereux: ‘The anthropologist can seldom find real love in the field. He can, if he be worthy of it, [however] find friends and thereby learn all anyone can know about the epiphany, in that particular culture, of the universal Eros who is at the root of all life.’ (1967: 120)

In viewing friendship as a possible means to move beyond the segmental orientations embedded in taking up a professional stance, orienting to others as typified culture-bearing ‘informants’, or seeing particular acts as tokens of cultural types, friendship is thus taken by Devereux to represent a possible space wherein an *existential orientation* to the complexity, dynamism, and uniqueness of *actual persons* is made possible in the ethnographic encounter. As such, it represents a space through which to forestall, even if only briefly, those countertransfereential ‘distortions’ that are otherwise continuously at play in the midst of such encounters. Friendships are, for Devereux, thus intimate spaces that may help to momentarily arrest a purely social scientific gaze upon a set of interactions, situations, or experiences.

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If for Geertz friendship in the field is a ‘set of partial fictions that are half-seen through’ that arise from the asymmetrical relationship between the ethnographer and his or her informants, and for Devereux friendship is in contrast deemed a potential remedy to the reductive typifications inherent in social scientific modes of analysis and engagement, how should we understand our experience of ‘friendship’ in the field? Is it illusion, artifice, projection, or worse?

While the complex political, moral, and intersubjective realities emphasized by Geertz and Devereux are certainly always evident in friendships that are cultivated in the context of fieldwork, they are also very much implicated to greater or lesser degrees in all forms of friendship, a point that Jacques Derrida has convincingly made in his book *The Politics of Friendship* (2005). To think that the kernel of what we term friendship is exhausted in the midst of such political and ethical realities, however, is to miss an important point, I think, about the possibilities for feeling, experiencing, and understanding that are afforded by friendship. Such possibilities situate the anthropological endeavor squarely within a confrontation that we have at all times, in all human relationships, with the singular realities of our own and other’s existence.

So the question remains: can we ever truly write ethnographically about our friends?

A return

The same summer Maffel passed away I returned to say my goodbyes. I had been unable to attend his actual funeral because my Canadian grandmother was extremely frail at the time and my family expected that she too might pass any day. As it turns out, she died two weeks after Maffel. Many things happened on that trip back to Yap, including the terribly

difficult moments of seeing my Yapese mother for the first time since his passing and later visiting Maffel's grave. One of the most unexpected and painful events, however, arose in the context of finding a notebook, a shorthand diary of sorts, which Maffel had kept throughout the years that I had known him. I had recalled seeing the notebook in and amongst his things over the years, and had on occasion seen him writing in it and reading from it. A few days after my arrival, Maffel's youngest daughter and I came upon the notebook as we were going through his personal effects in an effort to find some missing documentation that the family needed to help settle his estate. Much to my surprise, upon finding the book she started immediately flipping through the pages, reading as she went. Simply seeing Maffel's handwriting, the tangible impress of his being on those well-worn pages, was almost too much for me to take. Hearing her read through the short lists of things to do, groceries to buy, gifts given and received, was even more heart wrenching as it re-enlivened those events, both mundane and eventful, that mattered enough for Maffel to take note of them.

As the pages progressed his handwriting became larger and less legible. This was a reflection of his health deteriorating and his eyesight worsening. The most difficult pages to read were of course, the last few. At the time Maffel was writing those pages he was in the hospital living through his final days. He was so sick at that point, I was told, that he could barely speak. When he most needed to communicate he did so through writing. Those few brief requests, requests to be moved, turned over, to get more 'gas' (oxygen), were communicative requests borne of a suffering I can only partially imagine. As his daughter read the last few lines written in the notebook, her hands touched the page where the shaky and almost illegible letters trailed off.

In different ways, the contents of the notebook moved us both deeply. For me, however, some of the most personally poignant moments arose in hearing the inscriptions dated throughout July and August of 2001. This was the summer of my first stay with Maffel and his family in Yap. Interspersed in Maffel's short lists of things to get, social security checks received, and events to remember, were a few short notes concerning my arrival and departure. Maffel had used my first name, Jason. Reading those pages, seeing how Maffel had thought to use my name, rather than the terms '*nubchai*' or 'tourist' or some other typified designation, indicated to me that my presence that summer was not merely a nuisance, an obligation, or simply a business transaction. There was, even in those first few weeks of knowing each other, a glimmer of a rather different possibility for connection between us. And yet, those inscriptions, the stories associated with them, and the powerful emotional response I had to them, does not in any way capture the existential dynamics and contours of the connection that Maffel and I had between us. Nor does my present ethnographic retelling of it do so, which is of course always necessarily a partial one.

On love, friendship, and intersubjective asymmetries

Love is constituted through the dual process of mutual exposure (between lovers) combined with concealment (from everybody else). To discuss love at all as a topic for research papers is in some ways to contradict the essence of love (...) What I consider impossible is that social scientific interrogation will ever be able to unearth true, authentic, love-secrets, just because once such secrets are surrendered to the public they are automatically devalued. (Gell 2011)

In line with Gell's brief reflections on love, I believe that friendship, the experience of friendship, while something that is at once possible, ethically significant, and generative in the context of fieldwork, is yet somehow itself a phenomenon that is, at least partially, resistant to ethnographic modes of representation, presentation, and writing. Or perhaps, I should say more accurately, resistant to those forms of representation, presentation, and writing which seek a summative account of the various and ever-shifting experiential realities entailed in the context of a given friendship. In other words, while friendship, and friendships, potentiate intimacies, relationships, and forms of social knowing that would otherwise remain forever removed from the ethnographic gaze, friendship itself, however, in part both eludes and precludes the forms of typification, inscription, generalization, and public revealing that are necessary for ethnography, as much as it may otherwise help to give rise to them.

As phenomenological accounts of social being and belonging reveal, human intimacy and forms of co-present mutuality are always organized according to differing and shifting perspectives, attunements, and asymmetries (see Desjarlais and Throop 2011). While such shifting perspectives, attunements, and asymmetries are true of all human encounters, they take up a special articulation in the case of friendships where, as in the case of love, what can and cannot be said between friends, and to others about our friends, is very often itself constitutive of the friendship's worth, and in fact, of its very possibility for existence (see Zigon 2013). In this light, the unsaid and the unsayable, the secretive and the hidden, the untold and the unknown, are at the heart of what constitutes the existential core of friendship.

And yet, could it not also be said that knowing our friends intimately, anticipating their needs, wants, fears, cares and concerns, 'knowing them better than they know themselves', in short, having a typified understanding of who they are, what they like and dislike, how they react to particular sorts of situations, and how they organize their lives, is this not also a significant part of what we, or perhaps anyone, could mean by the term friendship? Is such a typified orientation not also essential to understanding others, even our friends, in the context of ethnographic fieldwork? Again, it is important to recognize that such typified accounts of our friends are but one pole of what constitutes a friendship. Remaining open to what we do not, and perhaps in principle can never know, about our friends, and yet loving them still despite such mysteries, is also central to the experience of friendship. Or at least to what Aristotle (1999: 126) would have termed friendships of virtue.

According to Aristotle, what is precisely virtuous about friendships of virtue is that the individuals involved are not myopically oriented to the particulars of feeling and circumstance within which they find themselves immersed in a particular moment in time. Instead, each remains open to the general wellbeing of the other person. Each wishes, despite the concrete specificities of the situation they find themselves in, that whatever else might occur, the other is still able to flourish. In Aristotle's framework there is thus simultaneously a mutuality and asymmetry that is inherent in friendships of virtue. In terms of mutuality, it is a dynamic concern for mutual self-flourishing in a given friendship that allows both individuals to directly embody the character-building virtues of beneficence and care. To care for another is not to experience precisely what another experiences, however. It is to see the other's predicament from one's own perspective and, even in the face of failing to understand the precise motives, thoughts, feelings, and

reactions that are entailed in the experience of that predicament, to still be concerned for that friend's wellbeing.

It is precisely the asymmetrical mutuality of beneficence and care that allows individuals to maintain an openness to the complex integrity of the being who is our friend, despite the fleeting and ever-changing realities of feeling, knowledge, desire, and circumstance that may otherwise conspire in disclosing to us a specific aspect of our friend's existence in that given moment. And it is through such an orientation of openness to the other who is our friend, in all of his or her complexity, plenitude, and mystery, that allows individuals to cultivate and realize the perfection of their own qualities through reflection and engagement with that person and vice versa. In other words, what is precisely at stake in friendships of virtue are intersubjectively distributed efforts to instill an openness, vulnerability, susceptibility, responsiveness, and mutuality that ideally works against reductive, partial, and segmental renderings of those whom we take to be our friends.

In friendship, such forms of mutual asymmetrical openness are also accompanied by secrecy, however. Indeed, for Friedrich Nietzsche (1996, 2001), that which I find myself unable to say to a particular friend about what I may otherwise know about her, as well as that which I find myself unable to say about her to others, are dual secrecy-based concerns precisely at the heart of what constitutes true friendship. The ability to keep secret aspects of a friend's life and thus protect her deepest cares, concerns, and anxieties from the scrutiny of others, as well as our concerns for only selectively revealing to a friend what we may know about her faults, frailties, or failings, are each, Nietzsche believed, central to the forms of intimacy that are entailed in friendship. This is no less true for what a friend can say about me. To reveal such secrets is to diminish, put in jeopardy, if not completely destroy the very friendship itself. And yet in the everyday face-to-face relationship within which a given friendship is forged, cultivated, and maintained, the negotiation of what can and cannot be revealed between friends, as well as what can and cannot be revealed with other friends about that particular friendship, is an ongoing, negotiated, and often conflictual affair.

There are not only asymmetries in what can and cannot be known between friends, or in the distribution of what can and cannot be shared about friends with others, but also between what we know of ourselves at a given moment in time and what others can know of us in the context of a friendship. The saying 'my friend knows me better than I know myself' captures in colloquial terms the recognition that others have insights into our motives, feelings, and intentions that might not yet be readily available to us in the context of our own self-knowledge. That a friend can say something about my self-experience that is not yet evident to me, and that I can take this information into account in my own self-understanding, and vice versa, is then another way that friendship is forged on ever-shifting intersubjective and necessarily perspectival takes on the ongoing historically sedimented stream of interaction between myself and the one who I call my friend.

The perspectival and aspectual asymmetries that are evident in interactions between friends, was a phenomenon that was recognized more generally by the social phenomenologist Alfred Schutz (1967) in his analysis of the ongoing and necessary asymmetries inherent in what he termed the 'we-relationship'. In the mutual embodied and experiential co-presence that is realized in the 'we-relationship', Schutz explains that

there are often moments in which the other is able to catch glimpses of the self's ongoing dynamic expressive field that are not ever immediately available to the self who may be living through the experience in question (1967: 169). Seeing in the co-present embodied immediacy of the we-relationship another's ongoing field of expressions as they occur may thus reveal aspects of another's self-experience that are not yet readily available to them at that moment (see Throop 2012).

Another possible articulation of intersubjectively distributed asymmetries in social encounters, of which friendships are one particular variant, is found in the work of the existential phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas. For Levinas (1987), it is not, as with Schutz, possibilities for self-surpassing that are revealed through an engagement with another. It is instead the mystery and necessary excess of the other as other that does. While we all too often reduce another's mystery, singularity, and plenitude to the self-sameness of our own being through our own typified understandings of them as particular sorts of persons, who tend to do certain things and who tend to think and feel in certain sorts of ways, the other is never herself reducible to such forms of understanding. As others, they necessarily transcend the expanse of our own self-experience (see Throop 2010, 2012).

Our friends think thoughts they will never share with us. They have desires, hopes, and fantasies that surpass what we have come to know of them. In short, they have lived a life that is not, and can never be, ours. While they may have cultivated relationships that we also share with them, our friends' experiences of those relationships have also resulted in experiences, memories, and attachments that are not, and in principle can never be, our own. Taking an ethical stance on such intersubjective asymmetries, Levinas argues that we must remain open, whether being a friend or not, to the singularity, particularity, mystery, and uniqueness of the other who is never reducible to our, always partial, understanding of who it is that they are. Such a Levinasian perspective suggests an ethics of representation, relation, and responsivity, while simultaneously revealing the limits of what we can say, and write, ethnographically about others, whether those others be considered our friends, or not.

Reflecting his own Levinasian heritage, Jacques Derrida takes friendship, and love, to arise within an interplay between 'le qui et le quoi'—the who and the what. To document the 'what' of friendship, Derrida maintains, is to dwell on specifiable and reportable aspects of our friend's personality, history, relationships, our memories of them and the particular events that they have lived through and participated in. It is, as Derrida asserts, to love someone for their particular qualities, their honesty, earnestness, assertiveness, what have you. Such an orientation requires typification, predictability, and generalization. To focus upon the 'who' of love or friendship, however, is to focus instead upon the irreplaceable singularity of the person whom we call our friend. Their existential uniqueness, particularity, and non-substitutability are essential elements, Derrida argues, of what a friendship is and entails.

Returning again to reflect on how such insights might bear on my engagements with the memory of my friend Maffel, it is impossible for me to speak of the singularity of his being, the 'who' who was Maffel, in any substantive way. Moreover, the intimacy that defines the bond of our friendship will forever keep me from revealing those faults, or even some of those virtues, that constitute the otherwise representable 'what' of his particular mode of being.

Conclusion

It is certainly true that friendship potentiates knowledge, extends relationships, and sediments social connections in the field. In this respect, friendship may provide opportunities for us to encounter situations, events, and relations that together or separately give rise to some of our most nuanced and rich ethnographic insights. It is also true that we may choose to write, even if selectively so, about the particular qualities, dispositions, events, and experiences that are entailed in the 'what' of a friendship forged in the field. And yet, a significant dimension of the experience of friendship, the particular 'who' who is our friend, must always elude such forms of typification and inscription, just as the 'who' who was Maffel must elude my reflections on friendship in this essay.

Friendship, like love, is forged in spaces of mystery, excess, not knowing, and not telling, as much as it may arise in the spaces of habitual familiarity and comfort that are cultivated, as Schutz poetically phrased it, in our 'growing old together' with our friends. Friendship thus arises in an ongoing, dynamic, and intersubjectively distributed arch of revealing and concealing, knowing and not knowing, telling and keeping secret. In this respect, when a given 'what' that constitutes an aspect of what we have come to know about our friend becomes unshareable, we are inevitably in that moment also attuned to the singular 'who' who cannot ever simply be replaced by another in the wake of that friendship's possible disintegration. Accordingly it is precisely in the dynamic tension between the 'who' and the 'what' of friendship, that the friendship itself is constituted and maintained. Without orienting to the particular qualities, dispositions, characteristics, habits, and abilities (the 'whats') that help to define the experience we have of our friend we would not be able to claim to know them at all. Without attuning to the 'who' who is our friend, however, we would not be ethically bound to protect or maintain the various secrets constituting the heart of that very friendship's existence. To reveal such intimacies to others, is to risk the friendship, and thus to render the non-substitutable being who is our friend ultimately replaceable. It is in this sense that I think that I can now answer the question that framed this article—Can we ever truly write ethnographically about our friends?—with an unequivocal equivocation of both 'yes' and 'no'.

Finally, if we cannot, without unequivocal equivocation, write ethnographically about our friends, what might an ethnography generatively arising from, and oriented to, friendship entail? It would, I think, require forms of working through an understanding of others that is grounded upon the shifting disclosures and opacities made legible in the singularities of particular relationships as they unfold in time. It would necessitate our being responsive to the cares and concerns of others without fixing, ventriloquating, or displacing them. It would mean opening ourselves to a long-term commitment to being intertwined in their lives in contexts that far outstrip our shifting positionalities of 'being there' or 'being here' (see Borneman and Hammoudi [eds] 2009). It would necessitate dwelling in the contours of those encounters in such a way that possibilities are opened to engage, move alongside, think with, question, learn from, be affected by, and responsive to those who share their time with us in the field (see Jackson 2012). It would also involve attending carefully to the fact that no matter how well we might come to know the various 'whats' that together constitute the familiar shape of a given relationship in which we find ourselves ethnographically entangled, that we also enact a fidelity (see Zigon

2013, 2014) to those underlying currents of amity that may pull us along in their wake to situations that outstrip the narrow limits of our analytic goals.

To be attuned not only to the ‘what’ but also the ‘who’ who is our friend, would thus force us to confront the fact that, no matter how well we might think we know another person, we can always in some setting, situation, or context still be surprised by them (in both positive *and* negative ways). In the process we can come to experience an ‘aspect’ or ‘side’ of our friend that we had not previously known. Most importantly, then, ethnography based upon friendship would entail working through and learning from our familiar ways of being with others, while resisting the reduction of any concrete given relationship to the interchangeable typified status of simply being ‘one among others’. This is not a call to do away with ‘typification’ or ‘objectification’ in the name of particularistic complexity, nor is it an attempt to render anthropological forms of engagement problematic by raising the specter of the incommensurability of worlds (see Keane 2003). Neither is it meant to voice a call for ethnography to ground itself solely upon what Webb Keane (2003) has termed an ‘epistemology of intimacy’ in an effort to counter the political and moral pitfalls inherent in enacting an ‘epistemology of estrangement’—forms of which have been long criticized for generating ‘totalizing’ views of ‘cultural otherness’ (see Fabian 2002; Marcus and Fisher 1986). Instead, it is a phenomenologically based request to trace the ebb and flow of intimacy and estrangement, subjectification and objectification, singularity and plurality, as they variously coalesce in the asymmetrical bonds of amity and love that give rise to friendship in its myriad forms, all the while thinking and writing in ways that can minimally maintain, if not enhance, those relationships.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my co-editor Valerio Simoni for inspiring me to think more carefully about friendship ethnographically. Thanks also to Timo Kallinen and an anonymous reviewer for their invaluable suggestions and critiques. Much gratitude as well to Abigail Mack for her insightful comments on the piece. This article is dedicated to the memory of Claudius Maffel.

NOTES

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¹ I should be clear that in using the term ‘friendship’ in this article I am not referring to a form of relationality that simply stands in a contrastive relationship to ‘kinship’. Friendship not only transects kinship but may often build upon its foundations. For instance, it is not uncommon in North American communities to hear people remark that a friend is ‘like a brother or sister to me’. Conversely, a brother or sister may in fact also be deemed a close friend. While there are inherently significant political, historical, economic, and cultural dimensions to all friendships, I would also resist reducing the existential dimensions of friendship (which arguably resonate with what Sahlins [2013] has recently posited as the ‘mutuality of being’) to a historically contingent rendering of the concept as primarily democratic, egalitarian, and optative (see Derrida 2005). In Yap, where some of the highest rates of adoption and fosterage are found in the world, where asymmetries of power are inherent in a complex hierarchical ordering of the social landscape, and where all forms of social belonging (including ‘kinship’ relations) are sedimented through ongoing engagements in effortful work and the dynamic transaction of suffering and compassion (see Throop 2010), a contrast between ‘friends’ and ‘kin’ does not pivot on a distinction between optative

and non-optative relations of responsibility, affinity, and care. A trace of the porous, heterogeneous, and ever shifting boundaries between ‘friends’ and ‘kin’ in Yapese communities can be glimpsed in the fact that of the two Yapese terms that can be translated as ‘friend’ (*fagaer* and *walaag*), the term *walaag* refers primarily to maternal kin relations of ‘brother’, ‘sister’, and ‘sibling’ (Jensen 1977: 115).

² On the problems of equating ‘empathy’ with ‘shared experience’ see Throop 2010.

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